3

CANON, CITATION AND PEDAGOGY: THE HOMERIC EPICS AND THE *BOOK OF POETRY*

ZHANG Longxi

Greece and China in antiquity are seen by many as very different cultures with little in common, and a theoretically interesting way to find connections or comparable elements in both cultures is the idea of the Axial Age proposed by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in his book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*The Origin and Goal of History*), published after the Second World War in 1949. The basic idea of the Axial Age refers to the fact that many important thinkers and their teachings—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Laozi, Mencius, the Buddha, Isiah, Jeremiah, etc., and the major religious and cultural traditions related to their teachings—all arose during the period between 800 and 200 BCE. For Jaspers, seeking transcendence and what is beyond the immediately present is the universal goal of human history, and the universality is seen in the simultaneous but independent rise of these religious and cultural traditions. Despite the significant differences among the Axial Age cultures and civilizations, Jaspers sees an overarching unity and, using a term reminiscent of Plotinus, he speaks of unity as "the One". "The One is rather the infinitely remote point of reference, which is origin and goal at one and the same time; it is the One of transcendence," says Jaspers. "If universal history as a whole proceeds from the One to the One, it does so in such a way that everything accessible to us lies between these ultimate poles."[1] In these words, we may detect a historical continuity and unity in the concept of the Axial Age.

In recent years, this concept has received some renewed interest and generated much discussion. Robert N. Bellah understands the Ax-

[1] Jaspers 2010, 264-5.

ial Age as a time of crucial changes, when important thinkers responded to their respective cultures and societies with strong critiques. Our renewed interest in the Axial Age, Bellah argues, is prompted by similar problems in our own time when "the old dream of progress in popular culture is being replaced by visions of disaster, ecological catastrophe in particular." It is with "a feeling of crisis" that he wants to "inquire whether the Axial heritage can help us or hinder us in our current crisis."[2] Thinkers in the Axial Age were facing what Jürgen Habermas calls "the legitimation crisis," and they "all involved social criticism and harsh judgments on existing social and political conditions."[3] From the Upanishads in late Vedic India to Buddhist monasticism, from the Daoist critique of the world of human interference to the Confucian critique of unethical rulers, and from the Prophets in ancient Israel to Socrates and Plato in ancient Greece, Bellah sees all the important Axial Age thinkers as criticizing the existing regime of power from the outside; he calls them "renouncers," and he recognizes some "utopian projections of a good society that the various kinds of renouncers offered in criticism of the existing order."[4] Powerful social critique and attractive utopian vision thus constitute both spiritual and intellectual resources that we may draw on in our own time, but also a burden of the historical past with destructive potential. "The great utopian visions have motivated some of the noblest achievements of mankind; they have also motivated some of the worst actions of human beings," says Bellah, with a deep sense of ambivalence. "Theory in the sense of disengaged knowing, inquiry for the sake of understanding, with or without moral evaluation, has brought its own kind of astounding achievements, but it has also given humans the power to destroy their environment and themselves."[5] The Axial Age, however, began a heritage that has been extremely important and influential in human culture and history, so it is necessary for us to reflect on its merits and potential dangers, and to draw from its resources and its experiences. Rethinking the Axial Age may provide a legitimizing theoretical background to our effort to examine and compare the great works in ancient Greece and China, the Homeric epics and *Shijing* or the *Book of Poetry*,

[2] Bellah 2014, 450.
[3] Ibid., 450, 451.
[4] Ibid., 452.
[5] Ibid., 465.

which are in themselves spiritual and intellectual resources for Axial Age thinkers to draw on for reflection and critique.

In his essay, "Homer in Greek Culture from the Archaic to the Hellenistic Period," Glenn Most first describes in a most vivid manner two Greek busts of Homer, created at different times, centuries apart, and many centuries after the historical time when Homer had supposedly lived. Given the vast time difference, neither of the two busts could have possibly been a true representation of Homer the epic poet, if there was, indeed, a real Homer in ancient time.[6] Like with many other ancient figures and cultural heroes, much of Homer as a person and his personal life remain a mystery; there is so much uncertainty about his birthplace that some witty lines have emerged and become rather famous, lines attributed to several poets with a degree of uncertainty fitting for the mystery of the great Homer himself:

> Seven wealthy towns contend for Homer dead,
> Through which the living Homer begged his bread.

The two busts seem to look very different to us modern viewers, but the ancient Greeks, according to Most, "seem never to have felt the slightest difficulty in recognizing both of them, different though they manifestly are, as Homer" (163). The point is that the image of Homer is not a realistic representation, but a symbolic one, for the bust is, as Most remarks, "an allegory of what Homer meant for the culture of ancient Greece" (166). His blind eyes, the lines on his forehead, his thick hair, his beard and his slightly open mouth, all these physical features are signs with symbolic meanings to be read allegorically, and they give expression to Homer's insight, knowledge, intelligence, artistic perfection, wisdom, and the other virtues belonging to a great poet. The idea of an author who created their canonical epic poems was

[6] In his effort to discover "the true Homer," the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico argues that Homer was not a real person, but "was an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their history in song" (Vico 1948, section 873, 289). Vico considers Homer as representing the collective identity of the Greek people and their poetic creativity, saying that "the reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer" (ibid., section 875, 290).

important for the Greeks, who "not only presupposed the existence of a specific author who composed them but also that this author could, and indeed must, be conceived of as an individual person imaginable down to the details of his physical appearance," says Most. And he is correct to add that "in this regard, as in others, Chinese culture offers a striking contrast" (167). Indeed, for the Chinese *Book of Poetry*, the concept of author is irrelevant, for we have only one name mentioned in one poem as the maker of the poem, but for more than 300 poems, we do not have any information of authorship.

The concept of authorship, however, has less to do with specific cultural traits or the nature of a collective psyche than with the nature of the works under discussion. In ancient Greece, as Most notes, Homer's poetry was for a long time orally performed and transmitted, and it was fluid and underwent changes and modifications to various degrees in each and every performance. From oral to written, as Most clearly shows, there was also a long process in which the works attributed to Homer formed a decreasing curve, "a gradual evolution and restriction." At the beginning of the Archaic Age, Homer was thought to be the author of "all poetic compositions in hexameter verse narrating the exploits of heroes from the legendary past" (169), but by the fourth century BCE, Plato, and particularly Aristotle, separated what we now call the Homeric epics—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—from all other old Greek poetry. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle "notes repeatedly that Homer's works have a higher degree of unity of action" than all other epic poems in ancient Greece, says Most. "Thus, by the second half of the fourth century BCE, the Greeks had reduced the number of works assigned to Homer from the whole mass of heroic epic to just two poems" (170). By reducing the number of works attributed to Homer to only the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Most continues to argue, the Greeks "had made it easier to determine the outlines of a single authorial personality who could be defined not merely by his content (tales of whatever sort about legendary heroic actions) but also by his particular aesthetic taste and tendencies" (170). In other words, a high degree of unity of the works—and in the case of Homer, the narratives about the Trojan war and Odysseus' adventures in his journey home after the war—made it conceivable and indeed desirable to attribute the poems to a single author.

The Chinese *Book of Poetry*, on the other hand, is a collection of 305 short and unrelated poems, in which there is no narrative or the-

matic unity and, consequently, the idea of an author for the entire collection did not even arise. That does not mean, however, that the concept of authorship was lacking in ancient China, because another important collection of ancient poetry, *Chuci* or *Songs from the South*, was centered on the figure and the life of Qu Yuan (339?–277? BCE), a poet living in the late Axial Age. As the fifth-century critic Liu Xie (465?–522) remarks, in his famous critical work *The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons* (*Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注): "Without Qu Yuan, how could we have *Li sao*?"[7] Now, *Li sao* or "Taking Leave of Sorrow" is Qu Yuan's major work in the collection of the *Songs from the South*, the longest lyrical poem in classical Chinese literature; it is also the earliest autobiographical work in ancient China, in which Qu Yuan spoke of his noble lineage, his talents and virtues, and how he was calumniated by his political enemies and alienated from the king and the court. "Taking Leave of Sorrow" is a great poem about loyalty, political intrigue, moral courage and integrity, and the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of one's country, a poem filled with tragic pathos and a strongly personal tone and individual character. Qu Yuan's works left a profound imprint not only on the *Songs from the South*, but on Chinese literature as a whole. So, we may conclude that when there is a sufficient degree of unity in a certain amount of literary works, be it based on themes or action, or on the lived experience of some protagonists, and when enough is known about the origin of certain works, the idea of an author as the creator of the literary work will become necessary and important. This is true of Homer in ancient Greece, even though the true Homer may not be an individual person; and this is also true of Qu Yuan in ancient China during the Warring States period (478–221 BCE). Outside the literary sphere, there are, of course, many other authors in ancient China, such as Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and thinkers of several other schools, who created some of the most important foundational texts in the Chinese cultural tradition during the Axial Age.

In his essay on Homer, Most discusses two important concepts: citation and pedagogy. Citation refers to "the modes of propagation and dissemination of Homer's poetry and thought, above all in terms of verbal quotation but also, more widely, in those of allusion, reminis-

[7] Liu Xie 2006, 1:48. Liu Xie's original phrase reads: *bu you Qu Yuan, qi jian "Li sao"* 不有屈原，豈見離騷?

cence, parody, and all the other modes of overt and covert intertextuality" (171). Pedagogy, on the other hand, refers to the use of the Homeric epics for the transmission of cultural values, "values outside of the world of Homer's poems," for the teaching of the young in the Greek society (171). The two concepts are closely related, and both are crucial for the canonization of Homer as the great poet for ancient Greece. As we shall see, citation and pedagogy are also important in considering the Chinese *Book of Poetry*, which David Schaberg discusses in his essay. In Homer's case, citation went from earlier oral performances in palaces and banquet halls to later recitations at festivals, and it was a process that moved from more fluid and creative modifications towards increasingly fixed, standardized, and canonized written texts, a process of change, as Most puts it, from creative "heroic performers of the legendary age" to "mechanical memorizers and repeaters of more or less authoritative versions of those songs," from "what had once been a purely fluid oral situation of composition and performance" to "the repeated presentation of a fixed, written, canonized text" (173). Plato's lively dialogue *Ion* gives a good example of a rhapsode who took pride in memorizing Homer for a festival performance rather than modifying what he recited, and it was perhaps through such public performances as festival recitals, as Most suggests, that "audiences gradually came to expect to hear a more standardized form of the epics than would ever have been possible in the atmosphere of lively entertainment and courteous flattery characteristic of a palace context" (175). The lack of fluidity and creativeness was compensated for by a more polished, and perhaps more refined version of the Homeric epics as canonical texts, from which all later poets and writers could draw for their own purposes, either as exemplary precedents and revered models or as targets of criticism, contention, rivalry, or even rebellion.

In ancient Greek poetry, Homer's position was supreme and unchallengeable. Most observes that almost all Greek poets of the Archaic period avoided repeating materials Homer had already dealt with so excellently in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* so that they did not have to compete directly with him. Even though many poems and almost all fifth-century Greek tragedies took heroic legends as their basic materials, "no surviving tragedy from that period ever takes as its subject matter the events recounted by Homer" (177). It is, indeed, "by maintaining a respectful, and perhaps even slightly intimidated silence that

these poets most honored Homer's primacy" (177). By the fourth century BCE, however, the situation started to change when historians, and especially philosophers, began to challenge Homer's authority and criticize him from various positions. Most explains the change as based on both a formal or generic difference, such as prose versus poetry, and also as a disciplinary difference, such as history and philosophy versus poetry, i.e., "differences in verbal medium and in institutional context" (178). Here we see the rise of philosophical discourse in the Axial Age and the so-called quarrel between poetry and philosophy, in which philosophy, best exemplified by Plato, criticized poetry, exemplified by Homer, not only in fierce competition for intellectual authority, but also in more fundamental ways to make a paradigmatic change in thinking and outlook.

Greek philosophers seem particularly prone to agonistic rivalry, says Most, for "their disciplines seem to have invited them to take a special pleasure in doing so [i.e., criticizing] with severity, indeed sometimes with apparent animosity—and they seem to have taken particular pleasure in treating Homer as a colleague deserving of particularly vigorous correction and improvement" (179). Among the pre-Socratic philosophers, Xenophanes already criticized Homer and Hesiod for having "ascribed to the gods all deeds which among men are a reproach and a disgrace: thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another," while he held that "God is one, greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or thought."[8] Heraclitus sounded even harsher when he said that "Homer deserved to be expelled from the contests and flogged."[9] Plato knew Homer well and quoted the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* many times in his works, but in his envisioned good society, there is no place for a poet like Homer. If such a poet arrives in the city, "bringing with himself the poems which he wished to exhibit," says Plato, in a sarcastic vein, "we should fall down and worship him as a holy and wondrous and delightful creature, but should say to him that there is no man of that kind among us in our city, nor is it lawful for such a man to arise among us, and we should send him away to another city."[10] The banishment of Homer from Plato's ideal republic marks a crucial turning point from the early Archaic to the

[8] Xenophanes 1996, 26.
[9] Heraclitus 1996, 32.
[10] Plato 1961, *Republic* 3.298a, 642.

Classical period and has a profound impact on the history of Western culture. And yet, there were also philosophers who came to defend Homer by presenting allegorical interpretations to argue that the Homeric epics contain deeper and more profound meanings than the literal sense of the text. The Homeric epics were important for the idea of pedagogy, as Most remarks, "Homer was central to the educational system of ancient Greece from the earliest times until the end of the Byzantine empire. . . It is also why Plato concentrated his polemical energies upon Homer when he set out to reform completely the Greek concept of education" (181). But to fight against tradition is also, and of necessity, to engage in and be influenced by tradition. Ultimately, Homer occupied the supreme position in Greek culture and became the most well-known representative of Greek poetry. Hesiod tried to compete with Homer, but "for all his importance," as Most argues, he "was never able to dislodge Homer from his position of unique supremacy: Homer is the poet whom the Greeks could refer to simply by speaking of 'the poet'; Hesiod was always the other one" (182). The centrality of Homer for education in ancient Greece guaranteed the canonicity of the Homeric epics, and we see here again the importance of the concept of pedagogy in speaking of Homer as canon. The canonicity of classical texts and their use in education make a good point of convergence at which we can now turn to David Schaberg's essay on the *Book of Poetry* or, in his terminology, the *Book of Songs*.

Pedagogy is one of the significant elements in Schaberg's discussion of the *Book of Songs*, which, as he describes it, is "a poetry collection that played a fundamental role in elite education and that was understood to inform not only educated speech and behavior, but even, ideally, character and motivation" (186). Just as in Most's essay on Homer, in Schaberg's essay, the concept of pedagogy is also closely related to citation but, in the case of the Chinese *Book of Songs*, the core idea is not citation as oral performance of a fluid form of poetry, but *re-citation* or quotation from the canonical *Book of Songs* as a more or less fixed, written text. Even though some of the poems, particularly in the *Guofeng* or "Airs of the States" section, show traces of orality in their identical, formulaic phrases, the *Book of Songs* as a whole was already written down in the time of Confucius. In fact, according to a legend often recounted in Chinese history, Confucius himself was credited for its compilation. The first mention of the Confucian classics in ancient Chinese texts is found in the Daoist book of *Zhuangzi*, in which Confucius was described as consulting with the

Daoist philosopher Laozi, saying, "I have been studying the six classics—*Poetry, Documents, Rites, Music, Changes,* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and I think I have done it long enough to become familiar with their substance."[11] In this passage, all the six classics Confucius was studying are obviously written texts, of which *Poetry*, i.e., the *Book of Songs*, came first. Different from the case of the Homeric epics and their stabilization process from the oral to the written form, by the time we have any information about the *Book of Songs* in the highly literate Chinese culture, it already existed in a written form. Therefore, any citation from the *Book of Songs* was already a recitation from a canonical text and, on a typical occasion of such recitations, as Schaberg remarks, "the material recited is anything but original" (187). In other words, the *Book of Songs* came to us as canonized texts, from which one might cite or quote some verses to borrow a certain cultural prestige and authority, but there was no room or possibility for anyone to change the text or make any creative modifications.

As we find in the annalistic history, the *Zuo Tradition*, when ministers and officials met from different states in ancient China, they often quoted lines from the *Book of Songs* to express their intent or aim in an elevated and more elegant language, and more significantly, to borrow the authority of canonical texts and, as Schaberg argues, to establish "a continuity that ties here-and-now instances of eloquent speaking to the avowed ancient sources of common Zhou cultural identity" (194). Schaberg shows that in many "diplomatic visits among the states, the proceedings end with a round of poetry recitations" (187). He describes in some detail the recitations recorded in the *Zuo Tradition* and, on such occasions, a reciter typically only mentioned the titles of particular poems, and everyone participating in the recitation would understand the reciter's intent or point. This certainly testifies to the common knowledge they all shared and the high degree of familiarity they all had with the *Book of Songs*. Lines from this canonical work were often quoted to embellish their speech, and that was one of the main uses of the poems. As Schaberg quotes Confucius as saying to his own son: "If you do not study the *Songs*, you'll have nothing to draw on as you speak" (191). Just like the Homeric epics, the *Book of Songs* provided basic education for the young, and that is an essential aspect of the canonicity of the text.

---

[11] Guo Qingfan 1954, 3:234.

It is important to realize that citations of the *Book of Songs*, as recorded in the *Zuo Tradition*, are never readings of complete poems, but quoting a few lines from a poem out of context and trying to integrate them into whatever the reciter wants to express in his present situation. This has internal textual evidence: Lupu Gui 盧蒲癸, a historical character in the *Zuo Tradition* itself, clearly said that "in reciting poems of fragmented verses, I take what I want."[12] This brazen admission, as the erudite modern scholar Qian Zhongshu comments, "reveals a method of rhetoric since the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE)." Such a rhetorical method, he continues to say, is "often perpetrated by the ancients and repeatedly seen in classical writings. All are ancient 'phrases and verses' borrowed to express present 'feelings and things.' This is similar to an author's creative transformation of materials, and quite different from quoting ancient words to support a contemporary argument, which is what a scholar does in search of textual evidence."[13] That is to say, citation or recitation from the *Book of Songs* in ancient China was a practice of using the canonical texts for whatever purposes the reciters had in mind, which might not be, and often were not, what the poems meant in their own contexts. As Schaberg shows, such use of fragmented verses from the *Book of Songs* is not just found in the *Zuo Tradition*, but also in the dialogues between Confucius and his students in the *Analects*, in the conversations between Mencius and his interlocutors, and in quite a number of other ancient texts. The citation of verses from the *Book of Songs* was supposed to illuminate the "here-and-now" situation, but sometimes their correlation becomes so vague, strained, and even obscure, and, as Schaberg notes, "the relevance of the citation to the context is so limited, or so embedded in *Songs* interpretations that are no longer accessible to us, that the author of a passage seems to have chosen the lines more or less at random, advancing only an empty claim of continuity" (198). The correlation between a poem and its commentary in the *Book of Songs* is also often vague, strained, and even obscure. In a book like the *Outer Traditions of the Han School of Songs Interpretation*, as Schaberg says, the practice of citation became nothing more than a "perfunctory or conventional citation" (199). The obscurity of correlations between the *Book*

[12] Zuo Qiuming 2006, 215. The original is in the section of the 28th year of Duke Xiang, and it reads: "賦詩斷章, 余取所求焉."

[13] Qian Zhongshu 1986, 1:224.

of Songs and the context in which its citation was supposed to do some interpretive or explanatory work may be a major reason why this Han school of *Songs* interpretation did not survive and was eventually lost during the Song dynasty, around the tenth and the eleventh centuries.

Schaberg begins and ends his essay by raising questions about the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs*, and challenging its normative reading. The "Great Preface" develops an idea from an earlier text, the *Book of Documents*, namely, "the claim that 'poetry expresses aims' (*shi yan zhi* 詩言志)," and in Chinese criticism, says Schaberg, this "is taken, both necessarily and quite untenably, to mean that the poem is an entirely individual and spontaneous outpouring of the author's deepest personal feelings" (186). Such a normative reading, he argues, though "now entirely customary" (204), is "surely one of the most influential misreadings of all times" (205). For Schaberg, the normative reading of an expressive poetics becomes an "untenable misreading" because in ancient China, as he tries to show in his essay, the educated elites always cited or recited already existing verses from the *Book of Songs* to fit whatever intent or aim they had, but never went out to create their own poems as spontaneous articulations of their feelings. The use of poetry is surely not the same as the original composition of poetry. So the point of contention comes down to these questions: apart from the citation or use of already existing poetic texts, was there a concept of poetry *sui generis* in ancient China, existing in and of itself, distinct from its use? Was there original composition of poetry as an expression of the poet's thoughts and emotions? The answer to both these questions, I would say, is certainly affirmative.

Confucius famously defined the four functions of poetry as *xing* 興 (the affective function of giving rise to high spirits), *guan* 觀 (the cognitive function of revealing social conditions and mores), *qun* 群 (the communal function of reconciling and uniting different social groups), and finally *yuan* 怨 (the cathartic function of giving vent to one's sorrow or grievances).[14] The last function points to an expressive poetics in the sense that poetry is understood as an outlet for one's repressed feelings and ideas, and that has become a major concept in both Chinese poetry and Chinese literary criticism.[15] Mencius did cite verses

---

[14] See Liu Baonan 1954, 1:374.

[15] For an extensive discussion of the idea that poetry gives vent to one's sorrow or grievances as an important principle in Chinese literature and literary

from the *Book of Songs* in much the same way as those reciters in the *Zuo Tradition*, but that is not the whole picture. When his student Xianqiu Meng asked him about the reading of certain poems from the *Book of Songs*, Mencius famously said that "the interpreter of a poem should not let the words obscure the text or the text obscure the intention. To trace back to the original intention with sympathetic understanding: that is the way to do it."[16] From these words, it is clear that Mencius understood poetry as an expression of the poet's "original intention," which should govern a reader's understanding. He certainly thought the poet held the key to appropriate understanding. "How can it be that while reciting an author's poems and reading his books, we do not know him as a person?" says Mencius. "Thus we must study the age in which he lived, and that is what we mean by making friends with the ancients."[17] James J. Y. Liu calls such a view "Mencian intentionalism."[18] So, there is no doubt that poetry in ancient China was thought to be an outlet for expressing the poet's intent or emotions, and that is what the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Poetry* tries to describe:

> Poetry is where intent goes. At heart it is intent, and let out in words, it is poetry. When emotion is moved inside, it takes shape in words. When words are not enough, one sighs; when sighing is not enough, one draws out the words and sings; and when singing is not enough, without knowing it, one's hands wave and one's feet start to dance.[19]

It is entirely reasonable to understand the "Great Preface" as speaking of the composition of poems in the *Book of Poetry* as the spontaneous articulation of the poets' intentions and emotions, even though we do not know who the poets are as individuals. Here again, the other ancient collection of poetry, the *Songs from the South*, and the central author figure in that collection, Qu Yuan, would help us understand the idea that poetry gives vent to one's grievances and repressed feelings and thoughts.

---

criticism, see Qian Zhongshu 1985, 101-16. For an English translation of Qian's book, see Qian Zhongshu 2014.

[16] Jiao Xun 1954, 1:377.

[17] Ibid., 1:428.

[18] James Liu 1988, 96.

[19] *Mao shi zhengyi* 1980, 1:269-70.

Given the huge differences in language, culture, geographical and historical conditions between China and Greece, it may seem difficult to find things comparable that encompass both the Homeric epics and the Chinese *Book of Songs*. By putting the two essays by Most and Schaberg together, however, we can see that the Homeric epics and the *Book of Songs*, standing at the beginning of these two great traditions as canonical texts, do have a number of comparable elements, for they constitute the spiritual and intellectual resources of cultural values in their respective traditions, provide models for later poets and writers to imitate and emulate, and offer the essential materials for education. Citation and pedagogy are important manifestations of the canonicity of both texts, and comparing them under these two categories reveals interesting commonalities as well as differences.

The Homeric epics and the *Book of Songs* were the main canonical texts in their respective cultures, continuously quoted, alluded to, and discussed. When we look at the ways in which these texts were cited, however, we may find a striking difference, as citations of the texts of Homer appeared for the most part in the intellectual sphere, that is, they were quoted by poets, historians, and philosophers, while verses from the *Book of Songs* were often quoted not just in philosophical texts but also, as we find in the *Zuo Tradition*, on occasions of diplomatic exchanges and negotiations by state officials in the political sphere. Moreover, while Homer occupied a position of high prestige in ancient Greece, some poets, historians, and particularly philosophers often cited him as a negative foil for their own work or argument, or even open critique. In contrast, the authority of the *Book of Songs* was much less questioned and its citations were mostly in the affirmative to support or illuminate an argument, and to lend eloquence and cultural prestige.

As canonical texts, both Homer and the *Book of Songs* were important for the education of the young and provided an intellectual background for all the elites as their shared knowledge base. That is the reason why they could be so widely cited and referred to for various purposes, which in turn consolidated their permanence and canonicity. As canonical texts in ancient Greece and China, the Homeric epics and the *Book of Songs* were not "literature" in a modern sense, but were exemplary texts that were supposed to offer important values in spiritual, moral, social and political terms for the society. When the poetic texts were perceived to fall short of the expectations regarding such

high values in any way, their canonicity would be called into question and become a major problem, which would give rise to ingenious interpretive strategies in both the Greek and the Chinese traditions. Therefore, apart from citation and pedagogy, another important area where comparison can be interesting and profitable is that of hermeneutics—the exegetical tradition of the interpretation of Homer and the commentary tradition on the Chinese classic.

In both Greek and Chinese hermeneutic traditions, the reading and interpretation of the canon has a fascinating trajectory of lifting the poems' meaning from the literal to the allegorical level, and both are closely related to the canonicity of Homer in ancient Greece and the *Book of Songs* as a Confucian classic. When Plato and other Greek philosophers questioned the appropriateness of the Homeric epics as edifying texts for the education of the young, their critique gave rise to allegory as a way to defend Homer's canonicity. In the quarrel between philosophy and poetry, or "the rebellion of Logos against Myth," as Ernst Robert Curtius remarks, "the Greeks wished to renounce neither Homer nor science. They sought for a compromise and found it in the allegorical interpretation of Homer."[20] Robert Lamberton also argues that because Homer and Hesiod were the earliest of poets, they enjoyed a unique position of honor and respect among the Greeks who, as a matter of principle, held anything old and ancient in great veneration. So, even if some passages in Homer may shock or offend their sense of propriety, they would find allegory as a way to make it palatable, to accept Homer as entirely appropriate, because in allegorical interpretation, what seems shocking and inappropriate on the literal level of meaning is transferred to a different level of "deeper meaning" that conforms to whatever is expected of Homer as a canonical text. The initial response in reading Homer may be a shock, but "tradition demanded that this response somehow be made compatible with the dignity of the divine and the respect due the text itself by virtue of its antiquity."[21] "Allegorical interpretation begins in earnest in the sixth century BCE, with the philosophic interpretation of Homer," Jon Whitman also confirms. Such philosophic interpretations may have different motives and purposes, but their effect, says Whitman, "was

[20] Curtius 1973, 204.
[21] Lamberton 1986, 11-12.

the same: the poetic text turned into a mere fiction hiding underlying philosophic truths."[22]

When we turn to the commentary tradition on the *Book of Songs*, we find an amazing similarity, in terms of interpretive methodology, to the allegorization of Homer. If, in the case of Homer, allegorical interpretation arose to defend his canonicity against any charge of inappropriateness, the Chinese commentary tradition provided an interpretive framework that precludes the reading of poems in the *Book of Songs* in a literal sense, particularly those poems that seem to speak of love with even a hint of eroticism, and thereby prevents any charge of inappropriateness in the Confucian canon. Every poem in the *Book of Songs* comes with a "minor preface" that leads the reader in his or her understanding, and such a "preface" often contextualizes the poem in a historical framework based on the *Zuo Tradition*. Let us look at just one example, poem 86 in the Mao text:

> O that crafty boy,
> He does not talk with me.
> All because of you,
> It makes me unable to eat.
>
> O that crafty boy,
> He does not eat with me.
> All because of you,
> It makes me unable to rest.

It is natural to read this poem as a lover's complaint, because the speaker in the poem has lost appetite and is suffering from insomnia, all because of "that crafty boy." The "minor preface," however, points in a totally different direction. "Crafty boy," it says, "is a satire on Hu. He could not manage state affairs with the good ones, so a devious minister usurps all the power."[23] This is a rather heavy imposition on the text that says nothing about state affairs or ministers but, by putting the poem in a historical frame, the "minor preface" determines that the poem is a political satire on Hu, that is, Count Zhao of Zheng, who has jeopardized the state by entrusting a notoriously perfidious minister

[22] Whitman 1987, 20.

[23] *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 [*The Correct Meaning of the Mao Text of the Book of Poetry*], in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (ed.), *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [*Thirteen Classics with Annotations*], 74b, 1:342.

with power, while ignoring the wise counsel of his loyal advisors. Instead of a young woman, as we might have assumed in our “naive” reading, the speaker in the poem is now identified as a good and loyal adviser alienated from the Count, and he is complaining that his anxieties about the state have made him unable to eat or sleep. Thus, instead of giving a poetic text an allegorical interpretation, as in the case of Greek allegoresis of Homer, the poems in the Chinese *Book of Songs* traditionally came with their “minor prefaces” that already provided an allegorical framework within which the reader was directed to understand the poems as morally or politically appropriate. The texts of Homer and the *Book of Songs* are, of course, different, and so are the concrete details of their interpretations and commentaries, but from a theoretical point of view, the hermeneutics of both traditions have a great deal to tell us about the nature of canon, the potential challenge to canonicity, and interpretive strategies that defend the canonicity of the classics. Therefore, Homer and the *Book of Songs* may have the possibility of intriguing and fruitful comparisons in a hermeneutic project, a project that looks into the nature of, the tension between, and the complex relationship of, the literal sense and the allegorical meaning. But that is a project for perhaps another occasion of scholarly discussion.

References

Bellah, Robert N. 2014. “The Heritage of the Axial Age: Resource or Burden?” In Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (eds.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 447-67.

Curtius, Ernst Robert. 1973. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1895). 1954. *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 [*The Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi*]. In vol. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 [*Collection of Masters Writings*]. 8 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Heraclitus. 1996. Trans. Richard D. McKirahan, Jr. In Patricia Curd (ed.), *A Presocratics Reader*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 29-41.

Jaspers, Karl. 2010. *The Origin and Goal of History*. Trans. Michael Bullock. Abingdon: Routledge.

Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820). 1954. *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 [*The Correct Meaning of Mencius*]. In vol. 1 of *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 [*Collection of Masters Writings*]. 8 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Lamberton, Robert. 1986. *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Liu Baonan 劉寶楠 (1791–1855). 1954. *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 [*The Correct Meaning of the Analects*]. In vol. 1 of *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 [*Collection of Masters Writings*]. 8 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Liu, James J. Y. 1988. *Language-Paradox-Poetics: A Chinese Perspective*. Ed. Richard John Lynn. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Liu Xie 劉勰 (465?–522). 2006. *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 [*The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons with Annotations*]. Ed. Fan Wenlan 范文瀾. 2 vols. Beijing: Renmin wenxue.

Mao shi zhengyi 毛詩正義 [*The Correct Meaning of the Mao Text of the Book of Poetry*]. 1980. In vol. 1 of *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [*Thirteen Classics with Annotations*]. Ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849). 2 vols. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Plato. 1961. *Republic*. Trans. Paul Shorey. In Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *Plato: The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 575-844.

Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書. 1985. “Shi keyi yuan” 詩可以怨 [Poetry Gives Vent to Grievances]. In *Qi zhui ji* 七綴集 [*Seven Essays on Art and Literature*]. Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 101-16.

Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書. 1986. *Guan zhui bian* 管錐編 [*Limited Views*]. 5 vols. 2nd ed. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書. 2014. *Patchwork: Seven Essays on Art and Literature*. Trans. Duncan M. Campbell with an Introduction by Zhang Longxi. Leiden: Brill.

Vico, Gimbattista. 1948. *The New Science*. Trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Whitman, Jon. 1987. *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Xenophanes. 1996. Trans. Richard D. McKirahan, Jr. In Patricia Curd (ed.), *A Presocratics Reader*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 25-8.

Zuo Qiuming 左丘明. 2006. *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 [*The Zuo Tradition*]. Ed. Jiang Jicheng 蔣冀騁. Changsha: Yuelu shushe.